

MAKE JAM NOT WAR

I am somehow compelled to make jam, I never tire of it. Something in me loves to fill the jars, secure the lids and then stash them away for later enjoyment. A strange satisfied smugness comes over me knowing the shelves are stacked with jars full of golden sustenance.

Perhaps it is knowing that I am partaking in a time honoured process unchanged for decades, or is it my Scottishness that relishes procuring goods at minimal cost?

The quest for produce is a driving force with me so when you next see a figure at the roadside checking out the state of the ripening apples or the sourness of the plums, give me a wave. I'll own up to being spotted up a ladder in the Franklin's carpark before Christmas stripping the apricots off the trees before the birds and hoodlums got to them.

I notice good sources of lemons, persimmons, figs and quinces all around town. I know that several varieties of apples grow along the March Road on the outside of people's fences and that there is a large stand of quinces on the back road to Cudal and also on the right hand side of the road 3km this side of Goolma on the way to Mudgee. I will never refuse fruit donated by accidental growers. I make jam just so I can give it away.

Magic happens when fruit, sugar and water combine and transform themselves into the luscious spread we enjoy on our toast each morning.

Nothing is better than 'real' homemade jam. There is also nothing worse than failure with your 'real' homemade jam. Three things are needed for a good jam experience.

Firstly, you need decent fruit. Spots, splits and lumpy bits are fine but bruising is a bit of a worry because it means the fruit must be quite ripe and it really needs to be just ripe and not much more. That way there will be plenty of pectin and pectin is the thing that makes jam set.

Secondly, you have to have the correct amount of sugar & this is usually done by weight not volume.

Thirdly, your jam has to boil, not simmer but boil, for the right amount of time and this can vary depending on your fruit.

How Do You Know If It Will Set?

This is always the big question and this is what makes jam making exciting. The setting point is when the pectin in the fruit, the sugar and the boiling time all join hands and decide to play together. Most jam will need between 20 - 40 minutes boiling to reach setting point, with the exception of berry jams which only need 10 minutes.

This is how I test mine:

Turn the jam off because if it is at setting point you don't want it boiling for another 10 minutes while you discover this fact. Pour a little jam onto a saucer and put it in the 'fridge. Then brew a pot of tea for yourself. When the jam has cooled and you have had your tea, push your finger through the jam away from you. If it has formed a skin and had definite wrinkles as you push through, then it will set. It should also clump well on the saucer.

Pay close attention to the jam on the sides of the pot and on the wooden spoon as it should also be setting. If you are not quite there, bring the jam back to the boil and retest. I like to continue boiling in five minute increments.

If the jam is at setting point I always feel happier to give it another boil just to make sure.

BUT, many is the time that have over boiled the jam - the sugar turns into its next stage and the jam can be brown and a bit toffee tasting. No matter - just label these jars caramelised jam!

Tips and Traps for Young Players

- Allow more time than you think you will need.
- Always use a bigger pot than you think you need, boiling jam needs plenty of room.
- Sterilise jars by putting them through the dishwasher OR by washing them and heating in the oven @ 100c.

- Never hold the jar over the pot whilst filling because if a jar cracks and loses its base into the pot, you lose all your jam. Broken glass is not good on toast!
- Notice how your jam looks when it has reached setting point and get to recognize that look.
- Don't wipe hot jars clean with a cold cloth as this can crack the jar.
- Scum will arise as you boil the jam. Scoop this off at the end otherwise you lose too much jam.
- Put the lid on when the jam is still blazing hot to get a really good vacuum seal.
- Enjoy every mouthful and share generously.

Raspberry or Blackberry Jam

2kg berries

2kg A1 white sugar

2 lemons, halved

Place the berries and sugar in a large pot and add the lemons. Heat slowly until the sugar has dissolved. Bring to the boil and boil for 10 minutes stirring from time to time if you wish. Test for setting point. Remove any scum and squeeze the lemons to release any remaining juices. Pour into hot sterilised jars and seal immediately. Stand overnight.

Plum Jam

2kg blood plums or similar, halved
and stones removed

2 cups water

1500g A1 white sugar

Place the plums and water in a large pot and heat gently to soften the fruit. Add the sugar and continue to heat until the sugar is dissolved. Bring to the boil and boil for 20 minutes or until setting point is reached. Pour into hot sterilised jars and seal immediately. Stand overnight.